

Future Development: Looking at how we evolve Curriculum for Excellence following the OECD recommendations

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The recent OECD Review of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is the latest in a series of opportunities to develop the aspirational goals of CfE; moreover, it is an opportunity that will quickly disappear – as have previous opportunities – if we do not act decisively on the OECD recommendations. These include the simplification of guidance, an enhanced focus on the quality of implementation (i.e. pedagogical experience of educators and pupils in schools), the development of curriculum development capacity across the system, and a greater focus on using research to inform practice. A rather intriguing recommendation referred to creating a ‘new narrative for CfE’. But what might this actually mean in practice?

There is a compelling case for suggesting that the existing narrative of CfE is over-complex, lacks coherence in places and has not therefore instigated the sorts of reform envisaged by the architects of the curriculum. Issues include the complexity of guidance that is often vague and poorly rooted in research, and which has often served to merely reinterpret earlier documentation for practitioners. A structural issue impacting on the narrative is a tension between the Four Capacities and the more specific Experiences and Outcomes. The OECD quite rightly asks ‘How clearly aligned can be a curriculum that is both about four capacities on the one hand, and about extensive Experiences and Outcomes on the other?’ (p.11). What the OECD termed the ‘elasticity’ (p.21), emerging from the above issues (particularly a lack of clarity around purposes and methods) means that pretty much anything can be made to fit. This in effect means that, for many schools, CfE has largely been taken up within an audit approach (against the Es & Os) followed by a rebranding exercise, rather than providing an opportunity for building capacity within the system and genuinely transformational change. The consequences of this include assessment-driven teaching, an exponential growth in bureaucracy and an intensification of teachers’ workloads. All of these impact negatively on the working lives of teachers, and have undermined trust in CfE, which was previously welcomed by many Scottish educators. They have all been recognised as problems in recent government announcements and initiatives, and yet they persist due to systemic pressures. This powerfully endorses the OECD call for a re-storying of CfE – but what might a new narrative look like?

First, it should be structured around a process-led approach to developing the curriculum. This should start from a clear definition of educational purposes, and then clearly set out a process for engagement. The Four Capacities go some of the way towards this, but require substantial sense-making by all those involved. They need to be framed against deeper purposes of education, or in other words should address the question ‘what are schools for?’. This will inevitably include preparation for the world of work, but education should also develop the capacity for critical, engaged citizenship (for an excellent overview, see <http://democraticdialogue.com/DDpdfs/WhatKindOfCitizenAERJ.pdf>). Educational purposes need to be accompanied by educational principles. The rather vague existing principles of CfE could usefully also include dimensions such as ‘interactive’ and ‘dialogical’ – ideas that are currently contained in a rather fragmented fashion in the Es & Os.

Second, a process-led approach should involve consideration of fitness-for-purpose, or in other words the practices that are best suited to developing the desired capabilities and attributes set out within the curriculum. This is about selection of the types of content required to become educated, as well as the pedagogical and assessment practices which might best develop the desired capabilities and attributes. This process should be rooted in an educational rationale and teachers’

collective professional judgments, and is quite different to the rather commonplace selection of content and methods to fit with existing practices and resources, or the implementation of techniques (e.g. AifL techniques) because they are mandatory.

Third, a clear narrative for CfE should include suitable processes for undertaking innovation. The GTCS already advocates professional enquiry and, in my view, this approach offers considerable potential to develop the curriculum. However, there are many types of professional enquiry; some are very light on process and do not connect well with educational purposes and robust research evidence. Thus a clear narrative for CfE should also incorporate a clear and detailed methodology for translating curricular aims into curricular practices. Our recent work with schools in East Lothian provides a template for this, and early empirical research suggests that this is both effective and successful in developing CfE in a sustained fashion (for full details of this initiative, see <http://hdl.handle.net/1893/22518>).

Developing a new narrative for CfE does not necessarily mean rewriting the curriculum. It does, however, mean developing clarity about how one proceeds from the principles and purposes of the curriculum to meaningful classroom practice. And it may mean revising some of the high-level guidance – for example refreshing the Four Capacities, and possibly dropping the Es and Os altogether. This will require both clarity of purpose and a proactive approach from those with the expertise and influence to redevelop CfE. As the OECD stated, ‘this is a prime opportunity boldly to enter a new phase, building upon the achievement to date’ (p.16).